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...AND THE FRENCH ALPS SHELTERED US:
LIFE UNDERGROUND UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

a memoir of a Jewish girl

by Marguerite Levy-Feibelman

↓
filed under "F"
in Domestic

Chapter 3

ROANNE

(1940-1942)

The city is different.

In Roanne, cours de la Republique, Jean-Baptiste TroisGros, the burly proprietor of the pension Les Platanes, agrees to rent us a room without board: Usually I do demi-pension only but I make an exception for refugees, he says, and he calls his two sons -- Jean about fourteen, Pierre twelve -- to give us a hand with the luggage. TroisGros is a corpulent man, bald with a rather kind face, he introduces himself by way of his roots: La mere and I are Burgundians, he says. He swells his chest as if he were evoking a good bottle of Clos de Vougeot. I notice that he calls his wife, "la mere," in the familiar old provincial way.

That night chez TroisGros Maman falls ill.

The doctor listens to her heart, checks out her eyes. Carefully he turns his back to Ghis, to me. To Papa he

whispers: Ah Monsieur, les temps sont trop douloureux! I understand the times are too painful, Maman couldn't inure herself against the events of the last few months.

My mother sick! Will she die?

Maman will heal slowly, says Papa.

Papa kneads flour into dough at the small wobbly table in our room Chez TroisGros. He chops vegetables and cuts up meats for stews. During World War I, Papa was a cook in the army. At 3 a.m., he rose and gathered nettles in the woods for his starved platoon, now he uses his skills to feed his family. Along cours de la Republique Ghis and I carry the home-prepared foods to the baker.

The street is teeming with refugees. I walk back straight, neck high, holding the baking tray with one hand, I play at being a girl from the Martinique. Ghis balances the covered dish on her hips. The joy of being alive takes over.

At the bakery we plop our home-made bread and stew on the counter.

Voila Monsieur, how much will it cost?

Deux francs!

The baker shoves our loaves, cast iron dish, into his wood-burning furnace with one push. I watch him wiggle his long shovel on a grate over the fire, then draw it out with one clean jerk. Snap! That's it! The latch of the heavy black door is shut. Curious, I look on. Oh, so that's how it's done! The warm fresh bread seduces my nostrils. The new

experience is an adventure of sorts.

The baker has a good round face over his flour-covered apron, and, a not-so-slight plumpness.

Come back in about an hour, he says, scarcely moving. I notice other casseroles, other foods baking alongside his straight baguettes.

Thanks to the baker we refugees eat potatoes, leeks, turnips, meat, until we can find a kitchen of our own. Do I say sincerely enough, Merci, Monsieur le Boulanger? I think so.

Chez TroisGros, Papa spoon-feeds Maman sick in bed. Poor Papa, in addition to the loss of his livelihood, the exodus, the national calamity -- he now must nurse Maman.

Papa is busy, Maman is ill. We need an apartment. Go and find one, Marguerite! How? In the company of Ghis I take up position at the main post office about 3 p.m. when the mail carriers leave for home at the end of their work day. Excuse me, Monsieur le facteur, would you please know of a vacant dwelling in your territory for my family? I use a do-it-yourself approach. I only vaguely realize that one could rely on a Real Estate agent.

An apartment? A mailman, short, slow-moving, takes his foot off the pedal. He wasn't my first target either rather the third or was it the fourth?

How many are you?

Four!

I have two rooms, a double bed in each. The second bed is in the kitchen. It's a large live-in kitchen with a coal stove, a table, six chairs, a lavabo in a closet.

Fine, I answer, eagerly willing to sacrifice privacy and comfort in this time of national emergency.

The outhouse is at the end of the garden.

An outhouse! What an improvement on the Correze!

He quotes the price.

It's very cheap. About twenty-five dollars monthly.

The address?

Nine rue de la Chaise in Riorges, on the other side of the tracks. You can come with your parents and look at it...

When?

To-morrow anytime, we live upstairs, the wife is there. Fine! We'll be there at 10 o'clock!

Next morning Papa and I cross over the rail yard bridge. We walk along the avenue de Mulsant, the main artery of Riorges. It's lined with haberdashers, cobblers, butchers, grocers, patisseries, fabric and knit shops. I am one of many youths who haven't yet made out exactly what poverty means. I'm only generally aware that Papa has lost his livelihood. I think: we are poor, so we shall live in a poor neighborhood. I must say that as far as I am concerned I wasn't strongly attached to my privileges, I hadn't earned them. I am ready to slough them off. Idiotic, naive,

romantic, you say? A collective memory surges forward in my mind, the famous letter which Francois I wrote to his mother after he lost the Battle of Pavie on 25 February 1525: "... Madame, to inform you of the rest of my misfortune, all is lost except honor and life..." Well, Francois, if you can be noble and stoic, so can I. There are secret places where selfishness, human comforts, judgement are seemingly banished but sacrifice reigns. I dipped there. And yes, in spite of the sacrificial impulse, the apartment would prove to be a good choice.

Papa hesitates. The rue de la Chaise is a narrow street filled with two-story grey row houses on both sides. At number nine, the door latch opens into a passageway, to the left -- another door. The vacant apartment on the ground floor is a two-room pied-a-terre. "You can wheel your bicycle from the sidewalk into the inner garden without lifting your machine," says the landlord, Monsieur Massey.

My entry into the urban world of cold water dwellings where bathrooms consist of wooden outhouses for "standing feet only," is at 9 rue de la Chaise in Roanne. Our outhouse built at the far end of a small inner garden serves the Masseys and us.

Let's take it, Papa! There won't be another. I'm innocently convinced, it's our one and only chance.

The Masseys are a middle-aged couple of petits-bourgeois

discreet, frugal. They mind their own business. When Madame Massey passes by our kitchen courtyard window she looks at her shoes. The Masseys appreciate their new tenants, the quiet Levys, well behaved and, most importantly, Papa pays the rent on time. Monsieur Massey even builds a rough table under the lilac tree "For Mademoiselle Marguerite, so that she can read."

Rue de la Chaise is not Vignols-en-Correze.

It's not studded with old stone farmhouses surrounded by vineyards; this is a blue collar neighborhood of an old Gallo-Roman city overrun with refugees.

Roanne, I later learn, is located at a point where the Loire River becomes a navigable waterway after it exits the central highlands. It's a densely populated sous-Prefecture located midway between Paris and the Mediterranean on the Nationale 7. Roanne is famous for its textiles.

Our lives as refugees begin here.

In the free zone all refugees are treated alike.

Refugees have to fill out forms, they have to register.

Refugees get refugee-allocations.

Vichy appoints a minister for refugees.

Actually at the beginning the Petain government is functioning rather well thanks to the graduates of the Grandes Ecoles. These elite administrators are technocrats, not politicians. But quickly we discover that the technocrats are minor cabinet ministers only.

I am almost sixteen. When on 3 October 1940 we learn about the first statute against the Jews published in the Journal Officiel, the National Registry printed by the state that discloses all activities, decrees, executive orders of the government.

That day, 3 October 1940, anti-Semitism becomes the French regime's official policy.

The new decree prohibits Jews from holding public office. It bans Jews from the judiciary, the military, banking, teaching, real estate, and the media. Even Jews decorated with the Legion d'Honneur, the highest Order of Merit in the land, are deprived of their livelihood. The decree explains that Jews are those people who belong to the Jewish religion or have more than one Jewish grandparent. We almost do not read a tiny paragraph at the end that says: "The prefects at their sole discretion are in charge of applying all laws..." The small print later swells with promise.

Overnight, French Jews become salesmen of pencils to life insurance.

Then comes a time that I remember only as a grey, formless, confused dream. Reality's images and feelings are blurred. I still love the "eternal" France. I believe this is a dark hour in my country's history. I am not yet cognizant of the treachery of our own home-bred anti-Semites.

When in November 200,000 Christian Alsatian-Lorrainers

are expelled from their towns and villages for refusing to become Germanic subjects, Ghis and I borrow a wheelbarrow from Monsieur Massey, and up and down the avenue de Mulsant we go: Madame, s'il vous plait, for the relief effort... We collect goods from store to store for the Christian Alsatian-Lorrainers.

That is November.

My patriotic loyalty remains unflagging. I feel France is hurting, I must help. I rationalize: The decree of October 3, and the one promulgated on October 4 which authorizes the internment of foreign Jews, all are German-imposed.

That was November.

In December --

a telegram is delivered 9 rue de la Chaise.

A cyclist knocks on the kitchen door. With one hand he holds to his bicycle, with the other he presents a yellow dispatch. Hope the news aren't too bad, he tells. Maman pales. Over her shoulder I read: "Jenny, Elias interned camp Gurs. Signed, Selma Wertheimer, Philadelphia."

(Selma Wertheimer is another one of Maman's sisters. She and her family have emigrated to the USA in 1938. Jenny who has remained in Mannheim must have sent a telegram from camp Gurs to Selma.

Inside the apartment Maman exclaims: My sister Jenny and Elias are here in France, they are out of Hitler's claws! And swiftly she reaches for the two Hanukkah Stollen set out on

the hutch which she baked for our Holidays. She wraps these in newspaper and folds the ends under the loaves. They go to camp Gurs!

Zut, alors! No fruit cake!

An angel I am not. I sulk.

That night, Maman takes out the eight-branched candlestick which she places on the table. Papa lights the Schammes, the candle that serves to light the others. In very low voices we sing together Maos-zure j'-schu-a-ti..., O fortress rock of my deliverance..., while Papa kindles the first candle of the Menorah. Then my father gives me the finest possible lesson in family loyalty: he slips on his British wool overcoat, tucks his white silk scarf inside the collar, and, he leaves 9 rue de la Chaise to take the night train for Gurs near Pau at the foot of the Pyrenees Mountains in southwestern France. Ghis and I send along two boxes of blue, pink, yellow, white baby booties, baby hats, sweaters, blankets which we collected for the Alsatian-Lorrainer refugees.

They go to camp Gurs!

For four days we wonder. Maman says she worried hour by hour, minute by minute, at the outcome.

When Papa returns, first he teases us. He has to give a kiss to Maman, to Ghis, to me. He has to hang his coat. He has to fold his scarf, he has to set his hat, his gloves on the shelf. Finally he sits down and, with a wide grin cut

across his hunger-hollowed cheeks, he tells us the news.

Jenny and Elias will soon be freed!

Freed, how?

I shook hands with a French official under the table...
he promised they will be released within a few days.

On that fifth night of Hanukkah, my father appears to me like a messenger straight out of the Talmud: "He who saves a single life, it is as if he had saved the entire world." I look up at Papa in awe.

Papa doesn't mention the barracks at camp Gurs. They are damp, uninsulated, wooden structures unfit for winter, built in a hurry for the Spanish Republicans chased by Franco in 1938, and meant to last one short summer. Instead, he reassures Maman: Jenny and Elias are both well, he says.

Aunt Jenny in turn had such faith in Albert's power at rescue that she packed in the bottom of her one and only piece of hand luggage which she was permitted to take along on her journey into deportation: four lengths of material from her husband's fabric shop in Mannheim. Her gift to her nieces.

The Strausses need a home.

Family!

Alas Roanne is an overcrowded beehive.

Quoi faire? What to do?

I can't again return to the post office lest Monsieur Massey gets suspicious. So I go to an outlying suburb and

knock on doors. Would you please know of a small lodging for two mature adults? My aunt and uncle have no children, no pets, they are refugees. I sell hard. I don't tell that Aunt Jenny and Uncle Elias are stateless Jews who speak no French. For Catch 22, we start hearing that Vichy is handing back to the Germans for deportation east -- the very same stateless Jews the Germans have forced on France.

From the sidewalk I see a high walled estate. The gate is open. No one comes out of the gatehouse. On the pathway, I meet two elderly spinsters, thin and tall. "Would you please know...?" They look me over, they hesitate. Shyly they point to a one-room lodge by the entrance. It is inside the domain. It is safe, damp, and cheap. I rent the cottage for fifteen dollars monthly. Hurrah, I have found a home for Aunt Jenny and Uncle Elias!

At 9 rue de la Chaise, I expect a pat on the back. "I have rented a place (for Aunt Jenny and Uncle Elias)." Papa stokes the stove, Maman is busy. I am made to understand that the family does things for you, you do things for the family. The climate has changed.

Gurs was horrible. Mannheim: terrifying. In Roanne, the Strausses have no ration coupons, no permits to reside. We are starving. Yet we never talk about it, we are so proud. Aunt Jenny and Uncle Elias never once mention what it felt like to be shuttled for three days back and forth over the borders in sealed railroad cars because Vichy didn't want to

accept Germany's Jews, and the Germans were determined to get rid of them. Instead Aunt Jenny raves about the baby clothes Ghis and I sent to Gurs: Young mothers came over from other barracks, they were so happy with the little outfits, the booties, the blankets, I told everybody: My nieces have collected all the lovely things. In my adolescent state I don't imagine what she herself endured and is hiding. Uncle Elias thinks that 7,500 Jews from Baden and the Palatinate were expelled from Germany to Gurs. Most would be deported back east and perish.

The Strausses spend their days with us, we are five people in one dayroom. Quarters are crowded.

I can't see myself a burden to the family, another mouth to feed, I even doubt there's an academic future for a Jew in a Europe ruled by Hitler.

Within a week at a street corner avenue de Mulsant waiting for the light to turn green, I tell Papa: I wish to go and work for money.

Papa clears his throat of a dry cough. The man who had prided himself on being able to support his wife and children, struggles. But Papa is wise. He listens to my decision. He knows I'm stubborn. He just says: Think carefully, Marguerite, before you drop out of school, you may regret it. He says it with even more respect than I could have imagined. It is liberating.

Next day I enroll in an accounting school, I already

know shorthand and typing.

Later on I read in a book that when British troops under General Tyron marched into Connecticut and requested that the people of Fairfield submit to royal authority and the request was refused, they put the village to the torch. "The poor children probably did not go to school for a while," wrote the historian. To this day I feel like a Connecticut kid.

Monsieur Ferry, a C.P.A. whose ad for a secretary-bookkeeper on behalf of a client I have answered in the Journal de Roanne, sits in his winter overcoat in his unheated office downtown. I sit opposite him. You know how to type and take stenography? You know the difference between credits and debits? Fine, you are hired! When do I start? Tomorrow! I see the gates of adulthood open before me. I'm going to get paid for my work! Hurrah!

Down by the river Loire in the industrial part of town, -- chimneys, block buildings, broken cement sidewalks -- a sign reads: "CHEZ JACQUES. Ready To Wear. Men. Women." I introduce myself: Marguerite Levy, your accountant has hired me to be your secretary. We shake hands. Monsieur Jacques, dark-haired, fleshy, blushes, and shows me to my office off the cutting room. His new secretary is young, green-eyed. And inexperienced. She dreams of being a Girl Friday loaded down with files and responsibilities. A pillar of the adult business world.

Quickly I learn that at "Knitwear for Men, Women" the

Pillar carries little weight. It mostly abuts a desk. Every morning I sit at my silent typewriter and observe red-faced operators furtively carrying bundles of tied sweaters through the exit door. That's it! Jacques has hired me not because he needs me, but to accede to his C.P.A.'s wishes: I am a front for legality. My boss sells most of his knitwear on the black market, he doesn't care at all about typed invoices.

Within the week Jacques, a man endowed with great charismatic animal charm, hops onto the corner of my desk. This time, blushing profusely, he tells me: If my wife asks you whether I receive any visitors, please say, No. I lower my eyelids.

Of course, Monsieur.

It's exciting! I am about to play a part in my boss's love triangle. I remember Sacha Guitry's comedy Menage A Trois which I saw in Paris at La Michodiere the year before. The play was about a husband, a wife, and her dazzling lover. In Jacques' scenario his cute little mistress, Nicole, saunters in and out of his office most mornings, happy, giggling in a soft tailored green suit. On Friday afternoon Jacques's dutiful wife dressed in black, demure, stops by my desk to do the payroll.

Monsieur, has he many visitors?

Oh non, Madame!

I shake my head, innocent as instructed.

She leaves, lips pinched, with the sadness of a deceived

wife.

The kings do it... the bourgeois do it... Monsieur Jacques does it... My French education is made real. At home I don't broach a word about my life in the work place. Not one word.

Jacques is generous in many ways.

From the start he grants me Thursday (afternoons) off to attend my Brownie meetings. Mais naturellement, he says, it's quite all right, he will dispense with my services on Thursdays. After noon.

See my Brownies...?

The following Thursday afternoon I march all twelve uniformed Thrushes into his office for show and tell. After a look of surprise he blushes, benignly.

Jacques also sells me at wholesale price a burgundy wool sweater knit in the famed Roanne stitch decorated with the three classical brass buttons. The garment wraps me in a fashion shield throughout the war.

Thinking back on it today, I tell myself working Chez Jacques was an enjoyable interlude in an otherwise dark merciless world.

The war news are grim. London is bombed nightly. Coventry is set on fire. The Italians advance into Egypt, Greece. German troops enter Romania. Bulgaria is made to join the Tripartite Pact of Germany -- Italy -- Japan. The Wehrmacht attacks Yugoslavia, Greece. Yugoslavia capitulates.

The British evacuate Greece. Rommel attacks in Cyrenaica. The Germans invade Crete. The HMS Hood is sunk. The Bismark is sunk. Convoys from America to England are attacked daily by German U-boats. There's a crisis in the Battle of the Atlantic. Every disaster knifes me personally.

To be precise, we are losing World War II. Deeper and deeper we slide into the jaws of the Thousand year-long Third Reich. Just the BBC in London seems to understand our fear. Nightly at 9.30 p.m., we listen to: "Hello ... ici radio Londres. The French speak to the French... We hear the ditty:

Ob Hitler. ob Goering.

Ob Himmler. ob Ley.

alles geht vorueber.

alles geht vorbei.

Whether Hitler or Goering,

Himmler or Ley,

everything's transient,

everything's temporary.

Reeling from defeat, tons of misery -- the broadcast makes light of German propaganda. It cheers us up. In my world of 1940-1941, I feel there is just Churchill holding out against Hitler: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." Churchill doesn't make false promises to his people. He doesn't cover up as our French leaders did. He

fights. To this day I am grateful to Winston Churchill. I believe he was one of the greatest men alive in the twentieth century. It is difficult to imagine what the world would have become without Winston Churchill.

Meantime, inside metropolitan France, queuing for food becomes a way of life.

Papa rises at 3 a.m.

He stands for hours in line at the butcher's for unrationed red tripe. Spleen, stomach, liver, and pancreas.

At the farmers' market avenue de Mulsant early on Sunday mornings there is a spot on the edge where a shepherd sells little round goat cheeses without coupons. The shepherd ties his goat to a picket, he plays his flute. The scene could be out of a Ferdinand Bol canvas of rural life in the 18th century. I pet the goat, point to the round wicker tray lined with large green leaves, and ask for the biggest crotin. I pay and wolf the little round goat cheese down. Greedily. I'm hungry. ~~But~~ In 1940 I feel I should have brought the little round goat cheese home for the family. So, ashamed, I return and painfully count out a few more francs.

Food is scarce. Every grocery store turns into a trading post. Maman barter wine for flour, sugar for oil. Eggs cost 36 francs a dozen. The British navy embargoes French ports because imported goods are diverted to Germany. The Germans requisition our home-grown agriculture for shipment outre-

Rhin, and we must feed their Occupation Forces. From January 1941 on our food rations are systematically reduced to hunger levels. We get eight ounces of pasta per person per month; ten ounces of fat include butter, oil, and margarine. A family has right to eight ounces of white tripe. Kidneys and intestines. To make up for a shortage of chocolate rations, the Forces of Occupation grant to category J3, jeunesse, youth between 16 and 21 years (me), four liters of wine instead. Millions of parents have but one thought: feed their young!

Mother Nature adds her wrath to man-made calamities. The winter of 1940-1941 brings sub-zero temperatures for weeks on end. Temperatures reach 17 degrees Fahrenheit. Our household of four gets 50 kilos of coal per month, enough to heat and cook for two hours a day. The fire in the stove goes out. The cold breaks the skin on fingers. Everyone wears bandages over suppurating frostbites. Bloody sores cover hands. Also after a heavy snowfall, farmers can't get their produce to market.

Until then in the Correze we hadn't been hungry.

In Roanne the daily diet consists mostly of rutabagas and Jerusalem artichokes. Papa cooks rutabagas in all shapes and ways -- baked, pureed, sliced. And mixed with pancreas or leeks. A joke makes the rounds. It goes: "What is abundant under Vichy?" Answer: "Rutabagas!" After months on a rutabaga diet I bloat like a balloon.

Although I love my parents dearly, I am hungry. And I

don't fail to let them know.

But my 350 grams J3 bread ration is mine, why can't I eat it?

Have you forgotten the 4th commandment?

Nothing counts in this house but the 4th! I snap.

I'm not forgetting to Honor thy Father and thy Mother,
but I am hungry.

We eat our rutabagas in silence at the same table.

Poor Papa, until now so solid, so powerful, is so miserable because he can't feed his family that, in order to salvage his self-respect, he must be tyrannical. Maman suffers in silence, which is worse, she goes into a spin of barter at her favorite corner grocery.

Even now, when I try to recall Roanne, it's the darkness and my hunger that come to mind.

Yet Maman slowly recovers her health with the help of the Demoiselles Joncour at the knit shop avenue Mulsant. The Demoiselle Joncour listen to Maman's worries.

Busy with yarn and needles Maman tells them about our hunger, the cramped quarters, Papa losing his finger-nails due to a lack of calcium. Oh Madame Levy, the savages; they will get their due! they respond. It is there that Maman gets acceptance for being a Jew. She tells them about the decree of March 20, 1941, which appoints Xavier Vallat, a rabid anti-Semite, as Commissioner for Jewish Affairs. Oh Madame Levy! we are all in the same boat, Christians and Jews alike,

we are French! And they too suffer from arthritis, Maman tells us at home, stressing yet another common bond.

Will the Demoiselles Joncour, Aline and Irene, accept in heaven this belated expression of gratitude from a daughter?

Since I enjoy an almost normal life except that I don't go to school, the daily hardships weigh less heavy on me. Life is my own. For example in summer, about 7 a.m., I fold my clothes on the pebbled banks of the Loire (I wear my swimsuit underneath my dress), I put my bathing cap on and off I swim across the Loire River. I do all breaststroke. At 5 p.m., after work, I again head for the river. Swimming energizes me. Once or twice we swim en famille.

Real Roannais like the Demoiselles Joncour of the knit shop, the mailman Monsieur Massey and his wife, the hotel keeper TroisGros -- even some of the haute bourgeoisie like the Lejeune spinsters behind their high walled domain -- make no distinction between names like Levy, Strauss on one side; and Voisin and Beauchamp on the other. I go to the opera in Roanne and see La Boheme; I enjoy Fernandel at the movies in the Daughter of the Well-Digger or Pierre Brasseur in Le Pere Lebonnard. I am treated with genuine respect Chez Jacques and, as far as food and coal rations go, we receive the same coupons as everyone else. Up to this time I and all members of my family have never personally suffered from any anti-Semitism in France. At this very moment, I feel strongly: France is wounded, I wish to share her fate. We distrust

Laval, he's a snake. But so far -- even after the decrees of October 3 and 4 -- we, the French Jews, do not separate ourselves from the destiny of France. We don't yet believe in the hard hatred of the Far Right. After all, for most of the French Jews, this is the only country they have ever known. We still think that ours -- although a definite uniqueness of all the unique persecutions we have suffered since two thousand years -- is mostly due to our military defeat to Hitler. That's it! We shall survive! My name is Marguerite Levy. My country has lost the war to Hitler (a monstrous Germanic tyrant) therefore I and hundreds of Jewish refugees are here in Roanne in the NOZ, and since November 1940 -- two hundred thousand Christian Alsatian-Lorrainers have arrived in the non-occupied zone, as well. All refugees work at tasks other than the ones they were used to performing.

Papa, the former executive of Geo Gignoux, the second largest paint factory in France (after Ripolin), is a part-time sub-representative for Robert Meyer, his nephew. Robert is relocated in Perigueux from Strasbourg. In Strasbourg, Robert owned his own pipe fitting distributorship, in Perigueux he represents a paper goods company similar to Mead.

For Robert -- Papa travels to Lyon, Vichy, Clermont-Ferrand, Saint-Etienne, selling paper goods to hotels and restaurants "while supplies last." Papa's ID reads: Albert Levy, representant de Commerce (salesman).

I work Chez Jacques as a secretary-bookkeeper.

Ghis is employed as a nurse's aid at Doctor LaRouche's clinic. In 1942 she takes a position as governess with an older couple of blue blood Lyonnais whose two grandchildren age five and seven have arrived from Paris.

In Roanne I discover that the Jews divide themselves -- organically -- into French Jews and foreign Jews. And, because French society is stratified, Jews socialize with their own kind only. Amid their own kind, French Jews have a pecking order, from orthodox to conservatives, with assimilated-cultural on the top rung of the ladder. A Brownie leader, I become involved with my Brownies' parents. They come from all ways of life. Some are wealthy, some poor. Some French, some Polish. I connect to their various worlds on a one to one basis. We touch each other.

I connect with Madame Epstein because she lives on rue de la Chaise.

Madame Epstein -- her wizened top of thin white curls sticks out from under her black winter coat. She's the embodiment of a Doomsday preacher. Epstein studies tea leaves and cites the prophets. On rue de la Chaise she stops Maman, me, and in a low pitched voice tells us: Jeremiah predicted the events of 1940, it's all written in the Bible. God is punishing us because we have strayed.

Maman who is sadly anxiety-prone finds comfort in Madame

Epstein's ideas of punishment and expiation. To me God willed it means: Madame Epstein is copping out. All she has to do is obey His Laws and get back into His good graces rather than grapple with the chaos of the defeat. I bristle: She avoids having to make personal choices, she abdicates her freedom. While I believe in the precept: "Help yourself and God will help you." So when Jeremiah stops Maman and me on rue de la Chaise, I walk away.

Abigail Epstein is tall, strong-boned. The oldest daughter of the Epsteins, Abigail limps. When I pass her on rue de la Chaise we never speak to each other. My senior by about ten years, she's a dentist's assistant. She doesn't seem to need any one. She looks self-sufficient, aloof. Do you think Abigail is affected by her mother's superstitions and her own handicap? I ask Ghis. So that she herself has become very strong?

Then one day rue de la Chaise, Abigail stops me.

Mlle. Levy, I am in love with a blind musician, a Jewish refugee, he refuses to marry me out of concern for my own survival, he even forbids me to go and see him. I love him more than I love myself, if he gets deported, I wish to go with him.

I'm barely sixteen, still untouched by love.

If he rejects her why does she insist? Does she like martyrdom? I disapprove of her fatal attraction. Yet I feel

flattered that she should confide in me, cognizant that in normal times I would have to wait much longer to gain an adult's trust. That's it! Social barriers and hierarchies crumble in the chaos of war and, out of the ashes, new friendships arise. And more positive things! The Epsteins are refugees from Belfort.

Henri and Denise Levi --

refugees from Strasbourg, live on the third floor of a brownstone in the center of town. On summer days, white voile curtains flutter in the breeze at their open bedroom window, red roses bloom in a vase set on the embroidered table cloth. Matisse might have painted their interior in any of his vivid still-life canvasses.

Denise is twenty. Henri twenty-five. Denise has her baccalaureate degree. Henri, his. They married just before WW II was declared and before Henri got mobilized. They love each other more than any couple I have ever seen. In their presence my distress slips away like rain drops from an open umbrella. I know that as long as I live I'll never forget their deep love.

Henri has been released from a POW camp for health reasons. I do not ask if he drank a lot of coffee like the other prisoners-of-war do before their medical examinations or if it is his humped back? I don't ask why he has a humped-back? It would be considered rude, and, in France, then,

everyone cared about manners. Henri has chestnut-brown hair, his deep grey eyes twinkle with humor. He plays a fine violin. Henri is the Jewish Boy Scout leader in Roanne, he belongs to the national committee of the E.I.F., the Eclaireurs Israelites de France, the Jewish Scout movement.

Denise is the girl Scout leader.

I start the Brownie troop.

We affirm life, and we create a community.

At their third floor walk-up I stop by most evenings on my way home from Chez Jacques. I'm sixteen. We discuss Scout meetings, we exchange banter. Denise and Henri are my best friends in Roanne. Sometimes in their country kitchen I meet other interesting people.

Monsieur Hollaender --

the downstairs tenant in Denise's brownstone, is a Jewish professor of history barred from teaching at the Lycee Henri IV, Paris.

Tall, imposing, thin like a coma, dressed in a formal three piece suit and tie, he expounds to the three of us (mostly to Henri) one Saturday morning (in Denise's kitchen) his concept of modern warfare.

He explains it like this: The socio-historic consequences of two clashing cultures meeting on the battlefields of Europe will have lasting universal repercussions for centuries to come as the savage elements contained in the

Germanic character rise once again to the fore under the influence of multiple pressures.

Shaking his cold pipe like a pointing finger, he emphasizes: This is only the beginning of many a great pitched battle to come.

Although thirsting for knowledge, I thought Monsieur Hollaender's explanation is a bit windy, but his concept of the convergence of historic pressures and national character sticks in my mind.

Madame Feist wears a reddish color wig because Orthodox Jewish law requires that all married women cover their hair so as not to attract men. Hers is very pretty although a bit stiff like all wigs are. Refugee from Paris, Madame Feist rents an old house in a suburb of Roanne for her three boys, three girls, and two nieces. Monsieur Feist studies at a Yeshiva in Paris. I met him once, it wasn't funny, he seemed not to notice me. Madame Feist visits Papa and Maman at 9 rue de la Chaise on Saturday afternoons. Perhaps mixed in with her mitzwah (good deed) there is the need to warm her frozen hands on our anemic coals, for it is written in Exodus 20:10 "Thou shalt not work on the sabbath, neither you nor any of your servants," in this way she incidentally warms her frost-bitten fingers on our fire. So what! After she says a Brocha (a blessing) over the fire, the gentle curve of her neck rises and a sweet ecstatic smile lights up her face. Papa,

Maman, both enjoy her radiance. Always my parents look forward to her company on Saturday afternoon.

One Saturday I go to her cold house in search of Judith. That afternoon, Judith makes the younger children and me translate prayers from Hebrew around the dining table. I miserably flunk. The following Saturday I instead attend a matinee of La Boheme at the Roanne Opera house.

In the NOZ, the non-occupied zone of France during 1940 through 1942, we French Jews belong to all denominations.

The extended Pierre Dreyfuss family are culturally assimilated French Jews. The progenitors of my Brownie Isabelle, they and I are friends.

Refugees from Paris, the fashionable sixteenth arrondissement, they rent a small house in upper Riorges with the children's governess. Pierre picks up Isabelle at rue de la Chaise twice weekly after Scout meetings, he sets her in the front basket of his bicycle and cycles up the avenue de Mulsant.

A graduate of Sciences-Po (Ecole de Sciences Politiques), the premier school in the field of political science in Paris -- Pierre and I discuss Descartes, Pascal, Romain Rolland, and Gide. Pierre wears sports pants, Lacoste shirts, and tennis shoes. Intelligent, sensitive, he's the son of a long line of leading French civil servants. His wife and his sister-in-law make the props for our Brownie plays. An older

brother, Doctor Jean-Claude Dreyfuss, was arrested in Paris and taken to Drancy. The family regularly sends food parcels to Dr. Dreyfuss at the transit camp for Jews. "So far so good, he's still in Drancy!" says Pierre with good cheer whenever I ask for his brother's news. I understand the doctor practices medicine and delivers babies at Drancy. In the Dreyfuss family no one gives in to doom. I admire their courage.

It's early summer 1941.

Suddenly one morning as we are half-reading the Journal de Roanne at the kitchen table we discover an article on page three which I xerox in the archives for this book. It says: "Several months ago, against the terms of the armistice agreement, Germany has appointed two Gauleiters (military governors) to rule Alsace and the Lorraine..." Papa coughs. To us, French citizenship means life, at least as far as we know; on the other hand, a German annexed Alsace may mean death, for we would fall under the jurisdiction of German laws.

At once Papa asks Vichy for clarification about the status that governs Alsatian Jews. Lips tight, he writes out the letter in longhand. I type it without changing a comma, so serious the matter seems to me.

General Koeltz's reply on official stationery of the Ministry of Defense illustrates the diversity of the men who

make up the Vichy regime. The general writes:

ETAT FRANCAIS

Vichy, 18 July 1941.

BN/2/GG

War Ministry

Section

Services of the Armistice

No 22.730

D.S.A./2

Sir,

In answer to your letter of July 3, I have the honor to let you know that no clause in the Armistice agreement has stipulated a change in the nationality for the people of Alsace and the Lorraine.

The regime set up by the German authorities in Alsace-Lorraine -- if it does not at the present time permit the French Government to enforce the rights of its citizens in those two provinces -- does in no way prevent the Alsations and the Lorrainers from being French.

Please accept, Monsieur, the expression of my sincere

esteem.

General de Corps d'Armee KOELTZ.

Director of Armistice Services

to: Monsieur Albert Levy

9, rue de la Chaise

Roanne (Loire)

Papa folds the letter carefully and sticks it into his jacket's breast pocket. I own the letter now.

Are we safe? We are French Jews! We know that on one side there are Petain, Laval, Xavier Vallat, Darquier Pellepoix, Alibert, Pucheu -- all fascist ministers, collaborators, marechalists, tides of power, desires for revenge, report writers to the Nazi conquerors, and their followers; on the other: many decent hearts of individual men and women sobered by our losses who do not like to emulate the Nazis. Like General Koeltz, the Demoiselles Joncour, Monsieur Jacques, the Lejeune sisters, the Masseys.

In Roanne, we select our own company. So far we are free, anxious that everywhere in Europe Hitler's Forces are on the roll.

The Wehrmacht penetrates deep into Russia. They take Brest-Litosk, Smolensk. The Russians are forced to blow up the Dnepropetrovsk dam, then the Wehrmacht cuts off the

Crimea; Kiev falls. The Soviet Government leaves Moscow. Stalingrad is surrounded. HMS Ark Royal is sunk, the Repulse and the Prince of Wales are sunk. The raid on Dieppe fails. German U-boats hunt British convoys in packs like sea-wolves. Some months over 500,000 tons of materials are sent to the bottom. I fear the battle of the Atlantic is being lost and England starved to death.

On the 8th of December 1941 we are in Roanne at 9 rue de la Chaise when America enters the war.

We receive the news seated around the kitchen table, listening to the radio.

Papa gets up from his chair.

Now we will win!

The BBC's broadcaster evokes in Papa images of Pershing and his Boys with the broad brim hats of 1917.

Alas, a long string of allied defeats follow in the Pacific, the Atlantic, and North Africa.

Ten months later it is breakfast as usual -- a cup of chicory coffee and a piece of stove-toasted bread.

At the stove, Papa is mashing rutabagas in the Moulinex. Nails soft from a lack of calcium, lips tight, Papa concentrates on his task. Then he hands me the wooden spoon for a lick -- here Marguerite! When he bends his tall frame over me, his forehead is wrinkled. In a serious tone, he

tells me: Marguerite, do you remember the story of the two frogs which fell into a pail of milk?

I recall that one frog gives up and drowns, the other paddles around until he finally churns up a ball of butter, then jumps free...

I am almost eighteen. I see Papa's eyes set deep into his cheeks hollowed by hunger. In his hand he is holding the pot of chicory brew.

In Roanne, our life is tenuous, immediately I understand that my father wishes to pass on to his daughter a lesson in survival: I ought to churn through rough times like the strong frog. Not give up like the weaker one.

To this day I draw at the image of the "Two Frogs."

Thank you Papa for your everlasting gift.

Next day 3 October 1942, the BBC broadcasts: "A battle is raging at El Alamein in the North African desert near Alexandria in Egypt." Expectantly we listen to the daily communiques: "All is going well."

Then a news blackout is clamped on El Alamein.

On rue de la Chaise, Madame Epstein tugs at Maman's coat sleeve: Rommel is at the door of Palestine, his Panzers are about to overrun Jerusalem.

On November 4 news break on the BBC.

"Rommel's Afrika Korps has been annihilated. The British 8th Army and the Allies under the command of Field Marshall

Bernard Montgomery have destroyed Hitler's tanks."

The battle of El Alamein has been won.

Our very first victory!

Papa boils a pot of hot water on the stove. He crumples some mint leaves. We have no sugar. No milk. But something happy has happened, something important: we celebrate the first allied win.

Within four days, on November 7-8, General Eisenhower's forces land in North Africa. In the street I hear myself humming:

"Ob Hitler. ob Goering..."

Everything's transient, everything's temporary..."

Chapter 8

INSIDE THE FORBIDDEN ALPENSPERRZONE

MOSAICS OF LIFE

There is a world war going on outside, there is a myriad of teenage tensions going on within myself. There is the fear of getting caught, the desire to live. We are marked for extinction, yet every cell in me tries to expand its potential -- live to the fullest within the perimeter of safety. Dare and be prudent. I am not young, not reckless, my instincts are sharpened by circumstance, I file away most accurately all the details of daily life inside the forbidden Alpensperrzone around Mont Blanc. I'm eighteen going on 4,000. I am a Jew. I am a French Jew. I couldn't say this to a Frenchman. I can only say this to an American.

* * *

The Lombard rococo church in Saint-Gervais has an altar at the far end surrounded by six life-sized stone statues. One of these represents Moses. He's holding the tablets

inscribed with the Ten Commandments... It's the same Moses!
The same laws! Yet, they persecute us!

Inside the church everything is fresh for me. On the left two confessionals line the aisles; along the wall oak wood steps lead to a hand carved pulpit, the floor is made of rough wooden boards hewn at the local sawmill. Soft pink stucco columns support the ceiling. The brothers Soldate built the church in 1822. Their northern Italian craft exquisitely enhanced by abundant gilded ornamentation, gives God's house a feeling of warmth.

It's Sunday morning. The children and I dressed in our best holiday clothes march down from Bonne Maman in two straight lines. At the top of our lungs we blare Alouette, je te plumerai and other folklore songs. Off key, but in cadence.

When we emerge from the narrow cobbled La Vignette onto Place de l'Eglise, the children's voices fall silent.

By the ornate portal of the church my charges join the throng of mountain folks who clutch their prayer books in browned hands more accustomed to swinging an axe or working the land than carrying a breviary.

Inside, the children genuflect. They dip a finger into the holy water and, quietly move to the front pews. There they see better. I slide into the last row of pews.

Mademoiselle come and sit in front with us!

But I'm Protestant!

My reply to Henri, the good-natured twelve year old from Nice, one of my charges, is simple and plain.

All through the prayers, the liturgy, the reading of the New Testament, the sermon, the creed, the offertory, the blessing, I bend my head over a notebook in the last row of pews. With my pen I discourse on the pros and cons of Jean Jacques Rousseau's Noble Savage. Don't Peguy and Claudel write their best work inside a house of worship? Why not I? Not a head turns in my direction, no one coughs. The Saint-Gervollais see that I am doing my homework. They respect my privacy.

By the fountain Place de l'Eglise, the children and I again assemble. Again, on the way back up to Bonne Maman we sing loudly, Alouette... One of the visiting parents who witnesses the scene tells me with Gallic irony: "I am sure your voices reached the heavens, generous, round and crusty like a handful of mountain hazelnuts."

* * *

When I leave Chez Nous one Friday evening at dusk the electric lights are still off. I call out to Maman: Good-bye. She doesn't reply, I go in search of her, I have to return to Bonne Maman. In the darkness of the hallway I see a line of light under the pantry door, I go for it. Maman must not have heard my feet on the stone floor nor my good-byes for her head appears in the opening of the door, furtive, and, at once withdraws. But not before I notice a flicker of two candles.

Maman!

Sh-sh!

Index finger on her lips she looks about to make sure no one listens.

Marguerite, the candles must always burn to the end, they can't be snuffed out, their flame is sacred, she tells me. Cheeks flushed, a look of anguish over her face, Maman instructs me in the practices of our religion. Now forbidden.

Yes, I welcome the Sabbath, Maman whispers to me, just as my mother of blessed memory taught me, and before her my grandmother (your great-grandmother) whose name was Gidel and for whose soul I bestowed the middle name Gerda on you.

The image of Maman clad in her best grey wool dress with matching shawl, standing in the dark windowless pantry amidst brown earthenware pots filled with sauerkraut and jars of home-canned green beans as she welcomes the Sabbath -- alone, fingers spread out in front of two flickers of light -- stuck.

Years later "as" I grow up to be an adult and live in another country and at a different historical time, I remember Maman saying her prayers during World War II in St.-Gervais France like a Marrano under the Spanish Inquisition when Ferdinand and Isabelle were concerned that the Jews might contaminate the newly liberated Catholics in Iberia. And it reminds me that history repeats itself every five hundred years, with a bitter twist.

* * *

It's while working at Bonne Maman as a counselor-teacher that I go on a memorable outing to the Mer de Glace with Arlette. It's my day off: we both need some excitement in our lives.

Arlette, seventeen, a lyceenne from Paris, follows her own independent course of treatment for TB under Doctor Tissot's supervision. In the course of her healing, Arlette acquires a quiet towering poise, the kind TB patients often do. It's that self-discipline!

She keeps her mouth shut, she knows how to pace herself. She will be good company, I tell myself.

And I invite Arlette to come with me to the famed Mer de Glace in Chamonix. I'm very happy to go with you to the Sea of Ice, she answers, her even tone of voice expressing a calm, collected strength.

Jumping crevasses as blue as the sky, some one hundred feet deep, doesn't seem especially hazardous to me. Didn't I just last week hop across the Bossons Glacier on my day off? I wish to share the experience with someone I like.

We forget TB.

She and I together climb from Chamonix 3,422 feet high, to Montenvers at an altitude of 6,276 feet. There the glaciers of Tacul, Leschaux and Taledre join and form the huge "Mer de Glace." The ice sea stretches 3,900 feet across, and is cracked with dangerous deep crevasses.

Perched on the edge two girls, seventeen and eighteen, are about to bridge the first chasm.

Arlette seems as casual as a gull about to take off.

From then on, whenever I turn around and look at her sense of ease with the whole ice world, I see she's a natural. It's obvious, she enjoys it. For us, who already are connected at Bonne Maman, it's another way to bond.

After the crossing, it makes sense to descend directly to Chamonix along the rocky tracks of the Montenvers cograil, instead of climbing down through the winding forest trail.

Suppose a guide does the same?

That's it! Arlette and I join his long strides.

We just traversed the Mer de Glace and back! I tell him.

(Silence).

We climbed to Montenvers on foot (I never had enough money for transportation), we didn't take the cograil! Here's an occasion.

(Silence).

It's a 2,800 foot height differential!

He throws me a "big deal" look.

It's humbling!

The rest of the descent our boots roll on the pebbles as we try to keep up with the pace of a cocky member of the Company (the famous Compagnie des Guides of Chamonix). In silence.

At a bend without breaking his cadence he points his

chin at la Verte. That's where he comes from. From atop the 13,900 foot high free standing jagged needle. The real stuff!

At 1,000 feet above Chamonix where the glacial melt tumbles into a white-crested torrent that feeds the Arve River, our guide forks off.

R'voir!

Au-revoir!

Of course it's exciting to walk all the way down from Montenvers to Chamonix with a certified alpine mountain guide, and breathe his energy.

By the falls, elbows set on the railing, Arlette and I throw sticks into the whirling waters and watch them toss about in the foam.

Half an hour later she and I make our way out of the Mont Blanc wonderland and, without a word, flag down a small Citroen camionnette -- the name of a dairy printed on the side.

That day, Arlette and I made memories together of a happy outing in the French Alps.

* * *

It's terrible, Maman says, how we have to hide our past. The impossible memories, I call them. Every time they come to the fore they have to be pushed back. For example images of Grandma Oppenheimer, Maman's mother, as she sat at the dining table head bowed over her white faience plate reciting: "G'd, thank you for our daily bread, and may all the children of

Israel have as bountiful a meal as we do. Amen." Although the blessing warmed my heart for many years, right now, I can't associate with it. I must have nothing to do with my Jewish ancestors. Cut it! I cover up my past as that many ships frozen in for a long winter.

Unbeknown to me this has an effect on my future feelings and attitude toward religion and people in general.

* * *

On the narrow path up to Motivon through the forests of larches and pines I notice the lights playing gaily in the leaves similar to a Chinese shadow play. It's my day off, I think about ideals. I decide "ideals" resemble mountain trails. At every bend there is one more turn upward, always the goal eludes me.

In the weeks and months that follow I think of other things as well. I think of the future. What will my life be like if and when I am a grown up woman? I decide my intelligence must be accepted as well as my looks, even in a male dominated world. That acceptance I need very badly. Only I don't yet know how to formulate it.

* * *

It is at Bonne Maman that I start doubting God seriously.

He is no longer the childhood G'd who revealed himself on Mt. Sinai and proclaimed His Ten Commandments to Moses: "I am the L-rd your G'd who took you out of the land of Egypt... You shall have no other gods before Me... Do not take the

name of the L-rd your G-d in vain... Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy... Honor your father and mother -- After four tumultuous years of adolescence (in wartime) I'm angry at Him, my childhood God; at all the myths I have been fed.

What is the meaning of it all?

Setting one foot in front of the other, body bent into the slope upward to Le Prarion mountain, I take Him to task.

You don't seem to care much. You didn't save France, you don't strike Hitler with a deadly blow. You haven't punished me for neglecting You.

G'd, are you?

In the vastness of the alpine universe I reflect.

G'd if you are the creator of the universe make your presence known. Look at "Man" whom you allegedly created in your image! He constantly wages war. Men are destroyers of life! It started with Cain!

Men!

The stronger sex, ha! I had to forge false identity cards, I, a girl of eighteen. Not man! Men didn't save my Brownies. False identity cards or some host families in Switzerland or baptism saved my little Thrushes. Actually mostly women saved my Brownies.

Cowbells tingle in stables on the Prarion within earshot.

Inside myself a growing awareness rises that men lust for power, for control.

Why, in the Bible, are you giving us (the women) all the duty roles? "Rebecca draws water at the well; Ruth follows her mother-in-law Naomi, 'Wherever you go I go.' Queen Esther saves her people in the King's chamber.'" I do not wish to be just a servant. Gender inequality hurts me. It makes me feel inferior. I have to hide my intellect which is often sharper than that of the men I meet. I wish for acceptance. I am angry. Even if equality is a fantasy of the excluded, really, I demand it. I want to be part of things. According to my honest abilities.

In sight of the Voza Pass at the top of a steep trail I puncture the belief of man, the superior human being.

Look! Men and women suffer equally from the defeat, equally, we fear arrest, deportation, torture. And hunger. Vaguely I realize that hunger is a big leveler. Ghis and I are the two only money earners in the family. Papa...

All around me small apples fall off trees not pruned since the war.

Walking in open fields under unlimited horizons like ancient shepherds did in the middle-eastern desert, I can no more hear G'd's voice than I can see his mantle.

The mountains are epic. They are immense. The high altitude expanses -- all are sweetly dizzying.

To myself I say: The vital force is everywhere. It's in the gushing streams, in the resin dripping from the bark of the pine trees, in the flowers, in the wind. That's it! IT

IS, therefore I am! Logically I establish my being on the basis of a common elan vital.

I become an acolyte of Pan.

But a week or so later, trekking to Megeve on my day off for a lesson in philosophy, I question my new found belief in pantheism. I wonder (logically): If all laws and physical manifestations of the universe originate with "The Vital Force" we are not "His" Chosen people.

The thought scares me. I still need protection of sorts.

Amidst the east winds rustling the birch leaves, driven by idealism and not a small amount of guilt, I tell my childhood G'd: Whether you like it or not I'm now going to examine all the other truths. I need freedom of the mind.

In the fields of multicolored wild flowers spread all about me on Le Bettex as they do in the Alps in summer, and in view of Mont Blanc shining in its white splendor under an infinite blue sky, I start examining different "isms". (I'm studying these for the baccalaureate, my high school finals).

I explore Stoicism, Empiricism, Hedonism, Determinism -- each "ism" gets unraveled down to the premise, methodically, while I'm walking, I tear off layers of absolutes like one peels an onion with salty tears.

On the way to becoming an adult in these wide open spaces I enter a metaphysical chrysalis state; only as soon as I shed one shell for the next, I feel the pain of the loss. For days, weeks, months, I'm vulnerable. Naked.

The spiritual search for truth is a painful long pursuit.

So far all I know for sure is: the earth rotates around the sun, therefore the "sun sets, the sun rises;" the gravity of the moon attracts the oceans, thus causing tides. In the atmosphere cold air turns water to snow.

In Saint-Nicolas-de Veroce, without warning, the clouds part and Mont Blanc appears with a dozen glaciers hanging down its rounded flanks. The view is magnificent. I put my hand to my eyes to shelter them from the brightness of the sun.

G'd, what beauty! I exclaim spontaneously.

To tell it as it is: I go through a period wholly destructive during which I demolish the security of sacred laws, the doctrine of creationism inculcated into me since childhood. I am at a loss. Only natural laws seem acceptable. Science.

G'd, say, Hineini! I'm here!

G'd doesn't answer.

Dejected, I think,

That's it! History counts. The history of mankind. The history of the world. Evolution. Of everything, of everybody. Then God could be sort of a universal ideal who stands above the fray of earthly affairs (above Mademoiselle Alain, Monsieur Moreau, Hitler, Churchill, Eisenhower, Petain, Roosevelt, the U.G.I.F. -- the male-dominated Union Generale

des Israelites Francais who makes concessions to the Germans in the hope of extracting goodwill). Perhaps he gave the original elan, the push to the world, then let it all happen.

I have become sure that the belief of man-the-protector of-women-and-orphans is a myth. Man may be protective -- in some instances -- but he also is destructive. Deep urges within me want to come to grips with life directly. With two vigorous legs, two muscled arms, and one thinking head. No intermediary is needed between life and me. The image of a go-between male authority seems ludicrous (to me).

It's a torment, and an ecstasy. I'm trying to find shoes that fit my mind's size.

Who am I?

Where do I come from?

Where am I going?

What is my place in the world?

Buried somewhere in my unconscious lie the answers, but I don't know them yet. Here in the Alps I keep discussing things with Him, I do not escape the difficult years. I go through all the growing pains.

From shedding primitive childhood beliefs to the idea that God may be a notion... a universal idea... Variable.

I'm a teenager.

I struggle...

* * *

Eric is a little five year old golden boy with the face

of a cherub. In the dormitory at Bonne Maman while pulling a sweater over his head one morning, he tells me, Mon papa est un voleur.

A what? I ask.

In French, the verb voler means both to steal and to fly with wings. The noun voleur, however, has one correct meaning only: thief.

Which profession does his dad practice?

In a voice as clear as a bell, Eric chimes: My father flies high up in the sky on the other side of the Mediterranean sea.

To a person of that period the words mean: his father is a pilot with the Free French in liberated North Africa, a dangerous career to admit to in German-occupied France.

Eric comes from a remarkable family. His mother hand-embroidered his name on every brief, every pajama. Every shirt under the collar is adorned with raised stitches: "Eric C." Most mothers use indelible ink. Madame Vachette thinks Eric's mother sets a bit of herself on the fabric that touches her son's tender skin.

In the distant alpine valley to where he has been sent to heal his lungs, little Eric is lonesome.

Each night he kneels by his bunk and says his prayers.

"Our Father who art in heaven..." followed by: "Little Jesus, please embrace Maman, Maria, and bring my Daddy safely home from the skies. And thank you for healing my lungs."

Amen."

Then he makes the sign of the cross, rises and, slowly, slides into the dry white sheets of the narrow bunk bed.

At night he quietly wets his bed.

* * *

Every night at Bonne Maman I sublimate hunger pangs into joy of learning. After the children are tucked in at 8 p.m., back in my room at my table by the side of a lamp fitted with a 40-watt bulb, I drink rations of knowledge without coupons. Sweet as ambrosia.

Opposite the balcony looking out on the black night I devour history, philosophy, and biology, subjects required for my high school finals. I discover the secrets of chlorophyll -- how the green coloring matter contained in plants converts carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrates in the presence of sunlight. My mind glows brighter than gold. Although my body lacks carbohydrates and proteins, my brain devours free data about bones, tendons, marrow and cells, unendingly. In a way I become the best fed person at Bonne Maman.

Closed in, I learn I can escape not only hunger but Vichy and Hitler and the dread of the hunt and the hunter. Night after dark night I drink at the source; in the morning, accustomed to the finer light of my inner illuminations, I squint at the raw sun over chicory brew and toasted brown bread.

An addict (for knowledge) I can barely wait for the next high of fired up neurons that have pushed wings.

I dream I fly out of occupied France to visit Plato. He tells me that he has written his Ideal Republic because things are too rotten at home in Athens.

* * *

Geraldine, a student, one year my senior, lives in her parents' home on the Mont Packard slope. I go and see her to borrow a textbook on anatomy. At the time no one telephones, one walks to see if a person is at home.

Almost immediately the visit takes a bizarre turn.

In the kitchen Geraldine says: Keep Anatomy I as long as you wish, I am done, and she pushes the book across the oilcloth. I start browsing through pages of bones, tendons, veins, when all of a sudden the garden gate creaks.

A minute later in front of me stands Geraldine's father: two shopping nets filled with rutabagas, one in each hand, weighing down his arms.

Medium short with a narrow bird face, he's clad in a thick overcoat under a navy beret on his head. Between his teeth he bites a cold pipe.

Geraldine and I are busy discussing exams. The kind of questions asked, the grades.

Without warning ~~the~~ narrow bird eyes rip through Anatomy One, through Geraldine, through me and, like a tornado, his temper breaks loose. Howling, he can't control himself. He

yells: France's place in Germany's new order is to return to the land, agriculture is our future. A woman's role is to bear children. You better clear your heads of fancy ideas!

Papa! moans Geraldine.

Be quiet when I speak!

A bit nervous, I shut my lips while he rants on.

Hard work and discipline will do the French a lot of good!

It's mid-morning, he harangues Geraldine, me, with Philippe Petain's message about the moral revolution: "Work, Family, Country," it is.

Papa, please! says Geraldine.

France must collaborate with Germany to establish a lasting world order! All the vauriens (good for nothings) should be deported!

Does he mean me? Has he a sixth sense?

He sets down his rutabagas.

We have no choice but to listen to: France's duty is to submit to German rule like an older obedient daughter. And other pictures of similar bleak defeatism.

Pay no attention to him, whispers Geraldine under her breath in a barely audible voice through the corners of her mouth -- the way prisoners do without moving their lips -- he's a colonel in the French army, he owes allegiance to his Marshal!

In her room a few minutes later Geraldine rummages

through a drawer.

Suddenly she cries out.

I detest this town, there's no place to escape to.

Ill at ease I stand by her dresser.

What am I doing here in this hostile house? The sooner I get out of here, the better.

I know I should support her, but enough is enough.
Through the panes I see snowy clouds floating over the valley.

A few moments later, surprise!

Geraldine pulls free from under her underwear in the drawer -- a hollowed head of curly blond hair.

My wig! she exclaims.

And up to the light she holds on her right fist her get away fantasy: Patty Hearst making a statement in sweater and skirt.

Her hair brushed back, she appears sturdy and hale.

I can't wait for this war to end so I can run away to Paris! she says and she kicks the drawer shut with her ersatz leather shoe.

Outside the heavy clouds burst open as they hit the high summits. The dues for the book have been paid. It's time for me to go.

In the hallway I coo, Oh so sweetly, in direction of the pantry where the little colonel kneels stacking away his wooden rutabagas compliments of Herr Hitler.

Au-revoir, Monsieur! Cuckold, you don't know Marguerite Levy was in your home.

At the front door Geraldine taps a forefinger on her temple: He's crazy, she means to tell me, in the age-old universal gesture.

The garden gate closes behind me. Rue de la Vignette, under the fresh thick snow swirls, my knees... no, yes, I'm afraid... they shake, having endured a tirade on the benefits of Pax Germana.

I take off with Anatomy I in hand.

* * *

That day Ghis supervises the cure at Bonne Maman so that I can return a book to Henri Baud. On the esplanade I meet General Magnin's daughter, Claire. She wears a tiny gold cross on a chain at the base of her throat, she stops me. She seems distressed.

"They" came at 3.00 a.m., and took my father away. My mother and I are worried. If they keep him: they'll torture him to make him talk, if they sent him home -- the Resistance will shun him thinking he has compromised the network. In any case my father's role in (the Resistance) is over. She holds back a tear. Her father is General Magnin. The family resides temporarily here in Saint-Gervais. Like most people, they come from elsewhere. His cell is sprung, she tells me.

She takes for granted that I know the "cell system."

His two contacts (the one above him and the one below

him) will have to go into hiding, she says.

Claire looks at her wrist watch: It's almost two o'clock, I have to go and read to my blind man, she tells, composed again: he lives up on La Vignette. And playing with the tiny gold cross on a chain at the base of her throat, she swallows hard.

By the kiosk on the esplanade, Claire and I part company.

Why has she decided to confide in me the dangerous secret of her father's arrest by the Gestapo? Because she had to tell somebody her age whom she doesn't know but whose face is familiar to her from having seen it for over a year in town. And because these impulses are visceral.

I feel empathy for her but not a bit surprised.

* * *

Sometimes Papa feels expansive, sometimes he could maintain a clasping silence. Sometimes, if I waited long enough, he might in time speak of some pinched sentiment.

It happened in the late afternoon on the cobbled sidewalk in front of the bakery at the fountain. I meet him by chance and walk with him a stretch upstream to keep him company. I like Dad's company. He clears his throat of his dry cough and, that day, he suddenly reveals himself.

Marguerite, all through history the strong had to help the weak. I had to fight for my younger brothers Edouard and Alphonse, especially on Saint John's day, when Christian

bullies rampaged through the streets of Soultz and tried to catch the younger Jewish children and toss them into the bonfires, he tells me.

For a moment Papa purses his mouth. Eyelids lowered he sees himself again as a youth who can't wait to leave his small anti-Semitic village of Soultz and make his mark in the big city across the Rhine, Mannheim. I know that at eighteen he buys his first house. After World War I, he acquires a patent for paints and varnishes. In a garage at night he stirs lacquers in deep black cauldrons, by day he goes and finds customers. He builds two factories: Aledy GmbH in Mannheim; Geo Gignoux in Paris. Both he loses to Hitler.

Marguerite, in Germany the Nazis first arrested the strong Jews. Then had three or four young thugs beat them up in public to intimidate the others. That's why I left at the start of Hitler's rule.

Papa's confidences move me. For the first time in my life I realize my father is vulnerable.

The red sun is setting behind the Prarion. Thin orange clouds meander through the skies, birds are flying below them. I have come to expect Papa to always be super strong. Always he responds to life's challenges with: Ruck zuck! Get on with it, pick up the gauntlet! Yet, at that moment, on the D 902 past the garage, in step with my red-haired Giant, a sudden emotion overcomes me. Papa, you must not be arrested by the Nazis, beaten to your knees, your glasses broken!

← Papa, I'll protect you!

Chin set, Papa hastens his step: Maman doesn't like to be alone after nightfall, he says. I return to Bonne Maman via the steep La Vignette. Pensive. Only later will I understand that, there, in the bend of the D 902 road up-valley from Saint-Gervais, I saw Papa for the first time as an ordinary human being. And that it was everlastingly liberating to the child in me.

* * *

Papa plants Maman's vegetable garden at Chez Nous in Bionnay on the border of the D 902 each spring. It's his "victory garden."

From seeds he starts his rows of carrots, cabbages, onions, potatoes, lettuce, and climbing sweet peas.

After he makes breakfast for himself and Maman, he goes to the shed.

He takes out his long-handled hoe and sets to work for a couple hours. Before noon he stops his bending, digging, planting. He stands up straight. Admiring his rows hoed along a string attached to two sticks, he smiles at his labor before putting his tools away in the shed in a way so that he can identify them at a glance and without much light the following morning. He arranges the long handled rake against the back wall, the hoe and the shorter spade in front. With his energetic step, navy shirt sleeves rolled up, his bare arms ready for a wash, Papa enters the house through the

kitchen door wearing his satisfaction on his face.

Against the Bionnassay glacier in the background, Papa waters his plants with two large metal watering cans. The two gallon size, one in each hand for balance. Papa walks straight as an arrow although he suffers from a hernia.

The weight of the cans travels up his stiffly held arms, and intersects at his compressed lips.

Before the war Papa would have whistled while working in the garden. Now, he doesn't draw attention to himself, he blends in. Turning, seeding, weeding the land, he wears a blue denim apron over his slacks. Shirt and tie. At home, before the war, he sported Victorian-style three-piece striped suits. Now, in the evenings, he uses the coat for warmth, minus the vest. He makes that one concession to comfort.

Papa is diligent. His energy never ebbs. Only when his chores are finished (and only then), does he allow himself the leisure of reading by the window or by the stove. Weekly, he walks the four mile round-trip to Saint-Gervais, knapsack on his back. In the village he goes to the butcher, he pays utility bills, he buys razor blades and pumice stone soap and whatever other few basics Maman and he need. His longest stop is at the library. Like other CEOs, Papa has had little time to read. Here in Saint-Gervais he selects books on European history, biographies, and novels. His choices include authors Andre Maurois, Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig.

After having read the biography of a certain king, Papa tells me: That king bankrupted the nation just as he would have bankrupted his own business. Papa is still amazed at his own audacity to enjoy words rather than work for his factory.

Regularly he glances with field glasses at the sunsets, the sunrises, over the Bionnassay glacier. Beauty and books are his pleasure and his leisure.

Chez Nous Papa cooks, does the laundry, washes the dishes. Papa tends the fire in the sitting room. Papa keeps house. I sense that since he can't provide the coin of the realm, he provides coins of the soil. Candide, circa 1943.

Only his is a choice of optimism: exiled from Paris¹ to the French Alps, living with false papers, my father takes the future for granted: he goes on filling the shelves of the pantry and his mind.

* * *

Throughout our early lives our fathers seem to us oversized. And we carry these childhood perceptions for a long time.

For instance on Friday nights, my Papa would bless me or act "hesitant..." if I had been naughty. After the Brocha (the blessing) he gave me a kiss on the forehead.

His stature was immense.

So that at age seven, after a bloody fight with Ghis, three and one half years my elder (during which she badly scratched the skin off my hands), he ordered both of us to

his library. The winner and the loser stood by his Chippendale desk: two culprits, head bowed expecting the worst.

Instead he tells us: From now on, Marguerite has the power to say: Stop! or you, Ghis, will have to deal with me.

Seated on his striped brown and black velvet chair, Papa looms one hundred feet tall (to me), like Abraham Lincoln on the Mall in Washington D.C., he is the father-figure.

Ghis throws her nails (at me) one more time, she tests my resolve. The newly anointed umpire shouts: "Stop!"

And Ghis's nails freeze in mid-air.

Oh, Papa!

* * *

If --

I frame Rudyard Kipling's poem, IF ---- and hang the pine frame on the wall above my bed at Bonne Maman. In the morning at night and in between I read the verses as needed. The ode boosts my morale at crucial times when I am frightened inside. I still can recite by heart:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;

.....

Or being hated don't give way to hating,

And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

.....

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,

And -- what is more -- you'll be a Man, my son!

I hear the poem speak to me. Unconsciously I modify the last line and read: " And what is more -- you'll be a Mensch, my daughter!" I feel Kipling addresses me.

Each member of our family has a different attitude toward life underground. Papa, the executive, accustomed to handling difficult situations understands our circumstance, he stays on top of things. Maman loses herself in small village life. Ghis knits. I push my life physically and spiritually into a realm as far removed as possible from the existential horrors and the hunger. I climb mountains. I study for the baccalaureate exams. I play, teach, take care of the children at Bonne Maman. Do silly things like pressing flowers between notebook pages, and catching butterflies. Soldiers are said to feel the same way during battle: they handle stresses beyond ordinary ability and, compensate in small individual ways to guard their sanity.

If -- is my war poem.

* * *

Chapter 9

WAR SURGERY

Part I: (Summer 1943)

On the surface, life at Bonne Maman is civil, ordered and peaceful. I teach, play with the children, organize outings. Only one evening at the end of July, Henri, Gaston, Francois, and Emile dig up potatoes in Raymond's garden. I see them bend, scratch the soil with bare hands. I can't stop them. They wash the tubers at an outside spigot, and eat them raw. They laugh and gag and get too sick to walk to bed. Raymond in his kitchen laments: My potatoes, they weren't even ripe! he says. It's that underneath the apparent smooth ripple of life at Bonne Maman, churns an eddy. What do you expect? They are hungry! says Marie, Raymond's wife.

Marie understands the tenet of French culture: that moderation doesn't hold when the guts growl. C'est la guerre! The profondeurs erupt like the ring of fire on the floor of the Pacific.

The following day at lunchtime in the dining room, Henri, the good-natured twelve year-old from Nice rises to his feet. I can see he has a novel idea. Grinning, he calls out: Hey guys! Let's snake around the tables chanting, We want food! We want food!

He and the "guys" come together as one organism, hands on the shoulders of the child ahead, they snake on the parquet floor between tables, breaking into a farandole to the rhythm of Georges Bizet's six-eight allegro "l'Arlesienne."

This time, the wild Provencal dance catches Madame Vachette's ear. She who comes from the Midi is touchee, she dismounts from her dignity, and listens to the sounds of hunger.

That night the portions of rice get rounder. After the meal the directrice nobly sets a sweet on each child's plate. Tenez! she says with a sort of subtle distant contempt as a duchess would who tries to appease her subjects (whose rations she has been hoarding for months in the pantry).

My own hunger eruption is more violent. I lift the keys to the pantry and eat a full one pound ersatz hollow-shaped cannelloni-style chocolates filled with luscious creamy sugar centers -- my J3 ration -- which Madame Vachette has denied me for months. To put it mildly: my craving for chocolate drove me crazy. Theft! If I had been found out, and denounced, I could have been deported.

That was only the beginning. Over the following few weeks I become ill from cuisine de guerre.

Although Marie does her best to feed us adequately, she's constrained by the avarice of Madame Vachette and by outside circumstance. At least once I watched her from the kitchen threshold grind up in the Moulinex livers, hearts, spleen, sweetbreads, then stuff the organ meats into thin gut casings, divide the grit into four-inch wiggles, and tie knots. That noon she served her Wiggles with Raymond's pureed rutabagas mixed with potatoes. Did you enjoy my sausages? she asked the children and the staff after the meal, her pert little nose turned upward. I nearly burst out, What guts!

Resourcefulness is one of Marie's shiny attributes. On Sundays she molds the innards in gelatin, and calls her creation my "Tripes a la mode de Caen."

What is wrong with my right arm? It begins to swell. A slight touch of the fingertip leaves a deep watery dip in the flesh -- yellow, white, red. At first I pay no attention. It will go away, I tell myself. Only the swelling spreads all the way to the shoulder. The right arm throbs. Soon it just hangs there by my side like a pendulum. Quoi faire? I am a teenager. I have no insurance. No money. The hospital? I can't go there either, because if I talk under anesthesia, I might reveal my real name, Levy. Be arrested, and my family too (deportation is always in the back of my mind).

It's an emergency!

That's it! An image arises under my skull: a snapshot of Papa in his World War I uniform. He suffers from blood poisoning. Why, Papa, didn't you go to an infirmary? I had asked. Because you didn't know when you entered a field if you would get out alive. Contagious diseases ran rampant. Consequently Papa decides to make his own incision into his arm. Ruck zuck!

At the mirror I keep trying to comb my hair. The elbow won't budge. I see two photographs: World War One - World War Two. They converge. I can't convey faith. Am I frightened? No!

In Ghis' room the balcony door stands wide open. A forest breeze drifts down from the Prarion mountain. I breathe in scents of earth, rocks, pine, and wild flowers. I face the mirror: the elephantine-sized arm hangs by my side. The elbow won't bend. Marguerite, right now! Ruck zuck! Let the pus spurt out. Cut into your flesh!

At the basin I wash my hands, strike a match, sear the large blade of my Swiss army pocketknife (a present Maman gave me for my twelfth birthday in Paris).

Watch! I call out to Ghis.

You are crazy! she replies.

My fingers probe for a soft spot between the two small bones on top of the right wrist, the blade's point enters the muscle through the layers of skin. Crosswise. Two cuts. (Into

my flesh). Pus streams out like toothpaste from a metal tube. At first yellowish and thick, then thinner and whitish. From the shoulder downward I press the right arm with the left hand until the plasma appears liquid and clear. It doesn't hurt. A piece of gauze, adhesive tape. And the wound is dressed!

Ghis isn't impressed. I would have gone and seen doctor Tissot, she tells me.

(The mark on top of the right wrist is still there, a small souvenir of wartime home-surgery). I didn't think much about it until today. At the time I cleaned up the mess, scrubbed the bathroom, sterilized again all four blades of the red Swiss army knife with a match and, pleased with myself, skipped down the stairs to the dorm.

Bonjour les enfants!

Yes, Papa, your World War One anecdotes were helpful to your daughter. Not simply because of the battles and the mutinies, but because there were illnesses to be healed, experiences to learn from. I often think about you, and I see how much you worked at your own luck. I must admit that in your deeds I find a source of inspiration.

There are differences however: I cut my flesh to the sound of Charles Trenet crooning Boum on the hand-cranked phonograph. "When our heart goes boom, and everything with it, that's love awakening. Life changed for me yesterday, now there are lilacs and white-caps on the sea, and the sun's

coming out. Now I hear nothing but boom. The entire world makes boom, boom." Trenet's deep voice warbled the lyrics with catchy tremors... "Boom, boum..."

Most mornings Ghis and I dress together in her room, we crank up the phonograph to hear Yves Montant, Edith Piaf. With Charles Trenet we hum: Je Chante -- Le Grand Cafe -- Pigeon vole (Pigeon, Take Wing), and other songs. My generation and I know by heart, La Beguine a Bango -- Il pleut dans ma chambre. "It's raining in my room, and the gentle rain of September is falling on my bed..." Those lyrics, those words regularly override our fears of getting caught by the Gestapo.

Part II: (Winter 1943)

Winter arrives, spreading a damp chill from the mountains into the houses. I catch a cold. The virus settles in my ears. This time I really need a doctor. But who? I feel reluctant to go and see Doctor Tissot with whom I am fairly familiar as I escort the children of Bonne Maman to his office, he might ask personal questions, so I tell myself.

Doctor Paillot?

I call him from a telephone cabin inside the post office during the children's rest period.

Doctor... hmm... I have... there is... a lot of mucus running down my nose. My ears hurt. I have difficulty

breathing. Could it be...?

Let's have a look, says his gruff voice through the receiver.

Into my Kandahar bindings I push, and ski down to his chalet.

The doctor himself opens the door. In the darkish pine paneled office I again describe the symptoms: mucus... feeling sickly... feverish...

He motions me toward a black barber-like reclining chair with arm rests. He probes.

Polyyps! he says tersely.

Polyyps? Can I cure it myself?

He suggests he should perform the operation for the removal of the infected growth.

They obstruct your nasal passages, he says.

Already I have tried two home-remedies: salt water sniffed out of my hollowed palm, and Vicks-medicated steam inhaled from a cooking pot.

In the barber chair the light shines in my face. All I can see are the doctor's horn-rimmed glasses on the tip of his nose. To the right on a stand, four shiny tools are neatly set out on a tray.

Bend your head backward all the way, the doctor orders.

From the corner of my eye I watch him pick up a nasal speculum.

Ah, analysis! I say to myself according to the latest

acquired knowledge straight out of Chapter One in my Philosophy 101 textbook.

What next?

He sets the speculum down. Again he runs his fingers over the outside of the swollen nose bridge, he presses here, he presses there...

Ah, induction! I think.

I'm learning about a new reality through the familiar principles of logic. Logic, and the art of surgery! You can say: But surgery involves live human cells. It does!

The doctor spreads the blades of a scalpel.

Ouch!

His stubby fingers tug hard. Cells crack. Tissues tear. Blood and pain run everywhere. Doctor Paillot curses.

Merde! I can't see anything! Too much blood!

A click on the glass tray -- an instrument plunked down. Rough fingers push up two thick gauze packings into the bleeding nose. Thick. Too thick. Head bent backwards I eye the white coat as it walks over to a huge medical handbook that lays open on an old wood desk. My brutalized brains in an effort to overcome the pain, dissociate. Functioning at an intellectual level, they lift into thought and, detached, they review the situation.

He feels. He senses. He analyzes his perceptions. He infers that the grey lumps are polyps -- good as far as analysis and deduction go. The problem is in the execution:

his rheumatic fingers cannot hold on to the slippery tissues.
The soft growth eludes his grasp. (In Saint-Gervais many older people suffer from rheumatism. The locals blame the rains, the winds, the snows). I know that, but I didn't know that the pain lessened because our nervous system can only handle one awareness at a time. And as my brains were engaged in the mental process of the operation, they shut out the pain perceptions. Unknowingly I was experiencing a medical truth: you can distract your own pain -- think of something pleasant.

His eye-glasses on the tip of his nose, the doctor returns to the barber chair. Fiercely he pulls his stool closer to my face. The curved scissors in one hand, the suction instrument in the other, he goes into action. The sharp blades cut. The "mini-Hoover" sucks. Inside my nasal cavities, the noise goes crr-pff-crr-pff. My nose turns into a "crpf!" torture-chamber. According to Chapter One, I expect a synthesis.

Sh-t! that much blood! exclaims the doctor.

Then the smell of seared flesh enters my nostrils, it's my own, it feels odd. The Synthesis!

Doctor Paillot wipes the sweat off his brow with his sleeve. Voila! And sure enough, the wound is cauterized.

I slowly exit abstraction. I follow the bloody white frock all splashed with red into a side-room. The shutters are closed, the greenish curtains frayed. There isn't even

one old magazine on the low table. He motions me to a couch. Rest here in the "waiting room" for a while before you go home! he says.

I sit on the threadbare brown and black plaid sofa, the cushions sag, the springs have popped years ago. He may have told me what to do if the cotton wadding gets too bloody because as I am floating off I vaguely hear: Keep swelling down... In the dimness he apologizes for a lack of something ... unavailable...!

After I come to, stretched out on the uneven springs, I try to rise to my feet, faint, dazed. Papa and Maman will offer me shelter for the night at Chez Nous. Outside I set my poles into a V and shoulder my boards for the two mile-trek up to Bionnay on the snow-compacted D 902. Fresh snow is falling. The invigorating alpine air whips me. Never mind. Marguerite, you are a tough bird, go!

Chez Nous I lean skis and poles against the wall by the side entrance. The Bionnassay is fogged in by low clouds. I remove my boots on the steps. Shoes in hand I turn the knob on the kitchen door. Papa stands at the sink brushing the laundry on an old fashioned metal scrub board.

Where's Maman?

Up at Le Champel trading wine tickets for flour, answers Papa, and he winks an eye.

I'm going to sleep here to-night, Papa.

My father looks at my face, sees the bloody wadding.

Remove the pillow from the mattress, lie flat, there's a fine icicle hanging down the shed's roof! he says with a twinkle. I don't tell him I went to a country doctor and had polyps removed without the benefit of an anesthesia: Papa knows. And he really isn't interested in details. Anyhow he believes that at eighteen nature heals itself if given a chance. And it's wartime.

Standing tall over his scrubbing board, he can't help blurt out what is dearest to his heart.

The German lines have broken in the Ukraine, he says.
Fact.

I break off the icicle and wrap pieces in a towel. I pull the down quilt high up on my neck but well below my face. The ice pack will keep the swelling of my nose down.

I go to sleep in my bed Chez Nous under my parents' roof. With the coming of the night my body will recover.

Fact.

And if I can sleep twelve hours I shall be mended next morning.

At dawn after curfew I walk down to Saint-Gervais.

I eat breakfast at Bonne Maman, Madame Vachette has my bread coupons. I can't really eat my parents' scarce bread rations.

FACT.

Chapter 12

THE CLASSICS AND, "HOW MANY SOLDIERS INSIDE?"

(1943-1944)

We live by our wits. In Saint-Gervais and elsewhere, however, education is going on. Everybody around me has their baccalaureate or is working on their baccalaureate. My sister has her baccalaureate. She uses hers as a class ring. Round. Finished, I am a graduate. All at once I fiercely want my baccalaureate.

Popularly referred to as the bac. or bachot, the baccalaureate in the French school system is the degree at the end of the secondary cycle required to enter college.

The examinations are tough, competitive. Only 30% of the candidates are awarded the diploma each year, most must take the exams over.

What with the allies wins in North Africa, Sicily, and a climate of self-respect created by Madame Vachette at Bonne Maman, I again feel I have a future. Seriously I again wish

to resume my education.

(At Bonne Maman) I look into the mirror and ask myself, What will you do, Marguerite, when the war ends? Underneath my curly hair, green eyes, and high cheek bones I harbor an intellect that growls with hunger. I can't stop it. I can't help myself. I have to learn about things. I have to study,

Flat on my back in my bed I contemplate the image of an after war future. I see myself going to university. Here I am in my room at Bonne Maman in Saint-Gervais, six hundred kilometers away from Paris, feeling for a minute luxuriously happy dreaming of college.

So much so that I burst into the kitchen Chez Nous the following Thursday and, without even closing the door behind me, I explode: Work bores me stiff. I want my bachot! I say to Maman.

What's holding you back? answers my mother, perplexed.

To Maman's credit, I must say, she instinctively encourages me. I doubt my mother realizes the enormity of the task, but she wishes to see me happy -- she senses I'm in turmoil, she hears my distress. If you want it, you can do it! she says.

I will have to master French literature, Philosophy, History, Anatomy, a second language, without the help of a correspondence course for I have no money. Besides I can't get any mail. A lycee in Saint-Gervais? None! In the parlor of their private school, the Demoiselles Dejeu express their

regrets, "The Chamois only teach as far as the third form, the tenth grade," they say.

But they recommend someone named Henri Baud. He is one of our very best teachers, they say in unison, at present he is at home convalescing from TB. And with typical French flair, they send me off with a burst of flowery language: We hope you will find in Monsieur le professeur Baud, a mentor able to guide you through the shoals of the baccalaureate examinations!

Allons enfants.... Onward to exams!

A two-story grey stone house behind a low iron fence on the Mont Pacard slope above Saint-Gervais, in an older neighborhood, shows a white ceramic plaque, La Roseraie. Wintering rosebushes shrivel sadly in the small front garden.

I knock on the kitchen door. A young slender woman with dark wavy-blond hair lets me in while drying her fingers -- wet from chopping celery roots. I'm Dede! she says. We shake hands. I tell her why I have come: The Demoiselles Dejeu from the private school "Les Chamois" have recommended Monsieur le professeur Henri Baud. I would like lessons in Philosophy and French literature for the bac.

Dede Baud lends a sympathetic ear.

It will do Riri a lot of good to interrupt his studies, he's working too hard, she says.

Dede and I walk through the dining room where the

children, Rene and Francoise, are eating lunch in their blue and white checkered school uniforms. The Fiz mountain range comes in through the windows, tooth after jagged tooth of limestone.

I am on my way to make contact with a teacher!

A taut ascetic figure, his face under straight black hair combed backwards over a high forehead, sits in the far corner of the study behind a desk piled high with papers. But it is the intense dark brown eyes that impress me most. They are eyes that have known pain. Early thirties? His skin is yellowish like someone's who has been bedridden. He wears a grey hand-knitted wool scarf around his neck. I can't give you lessons, Henri Baud tells me on that first visit, but we can discuss books from time to time.

Books! a surge rises in me.

Henri Baud has just returned home from a two-year stay at the sanatorium on Assy; he functions with one lung only, the other has collapsed. I underwent a thoraco, he tells me simply, I am under strict doctor's orders: bed rest, no exertion.

Longingly I look around the room. Books prop up the walls. Books weigh down the shelves. Stacks of books lean against the baseboards. Books the size of hands in leather covers, large books in paper covers. Books in Greek, Latin, French -- books give his study both a well-ordered and a chaotic look.

At home, first at 18 Richard Wagner Strasse, Mannheim, then at 76 avenue de la Bourdonnais Paris, Papa's library contained one huge Chippendale armoire filled with red leather bound volumes of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Goethe, Schiller, Lessing -- the classic authors. As a child I would stand on tiptoe or kneel to read their names, titles written in golden letters across the spine.

Ever since early life I have been surrounded by books.

I got books for presents. I owned Pinocchio, Heidi, the Grimm Fairy Tales, and many more. In Paris I read avidly Jules Verne, George Sand, Madame de Sevigne, Alexander Dumas, Merimee, Sir Walter Scott, Jacques London, and Gide. I bought books with my own allowance. From the lycee library in Paris I borrowed armfuls. I devoured adventure stories, fables, biographies, whatever. In Roanne, every day to and fro Chez Jacques along the avenue de Mulsant, I memorized a few stanzas of poetry as an exercise for my mind. Before I went to sleep I'd recite the lines, savor the rhythm, think about the images, the meaning.

In Henri Baud's study I stand arms hanging by my side.

Again I feel I am a student facing a respected teacher. I lower my eyes. He has a Master's in French literature, Latin, and Greek. He's a TB patient. He's under strict doctor's orders...

For a moment he looks down at his desk, at his yellowed paperbacks. Am I dismissed? All I want is to learn. I think

he is my only chance. Surely in Saint-Gervais there is no one else with a degree in classical literature.

When the deep brown eyes lift their stare out of the taut ascetic face onto me, I hope personality and passion will play in my favor.

Finally he says: I am rereading Homer. Are you familiar with the Greek classics?

We... I... studied ancient Greece in the fourth form at the Lycee in Paris, I mumble. Maybe I name Socrates or Plato or Aristophanes' The Birds, and, out of intellectual honesty add: In the translations of course! I can't remember. He asks me if I am aware that Homer already acknowledged that superior force allows man to treat others as objects or corpses or slaves? And that violence eventually boomerangs and destroys the agent of destruction --

This must be a dream in which I move inside a teacher's study near his desk and he teaches me again the ancient Greeks.

Sure I have nothing to complain of -- I am a Jew and I am free in occupied France, but I haven't been inside a classroom since May 1940, and this is the winter of 1943.

On my feet I fleetingly see three and a half years of pell-mell reading, makeshift shelters, false ID cards. I'm aware that I'm pinning my hope on expansion of the mind. So far I have imparted knowledge, preserved human dignity (whose survival many doubt), made this world a better place to live

in for the younger children -- I feel vibrant in the company of my passion. Silently I implore: Please teach me! Tell me about Greek thinkers. Romans. French. Anything.

Henri Baud has just awakened me to a great new idea. "Violence boomerangs and eventually annihilates the agent of destruction." I try to look calm. In my chest, my heart is pounding. He's talking about the Germans! Haven't the Allies already annihilated Rommel's Panzers in North Africa? They have landed in Sicily! It's actually happening! My brains light up! He's using the blue Mediterranean sea of yore to illustrate our present-day circumstance!

In my soul I still feel this experience is so holy it can't be fragmented (analyzed), so great is the chasm between the meaning it has for me and what the reader may see in it. I am gaining a new historic perspective.

In his study surrounded by books against a backdrop of the Aravis mountains in the French Alps, Henri Baud, is teaching me the ancient classics.

Did it strike you that Homer describes war as an infernal cycle that has the implacable and purely mechanical inevitability of fate?

My ears hear, my eyes see my war described in words spoken by a five thousand year old bard, and, I understand the illumination. The Greek classics are relevant!

Like most Europeans I believe in the myth that war is an inevitable part of life. Hasn't each generation of European males gone to war since the dawn of the tribes? Only later would I experience the American assumption that armed conflict is not an inevitable way to resolve quarrels between nations.

That noon on the cobbled La Forclaz, back up to Bonne Maman, I think: Not only does Henri Baud possess the cultured mind of the French and their lucidity, he also possesses their shrewdness as well. Not once did he allude to the Panzers that overran France in 1940 or the British Expeditionary Corps sent back in tatters to England without their arms -- he wraps the present in an ancient Greek cloak!

That's it! This works for me.

✂ 7

The vision of a future in which I can attend college, makes me return to the Roseraie.

This time no mention is made of whitewashed rooms in sanatoriums. Instead Henri Baud directly plunges into the topic that is dear to him that day: I have been researching the battle of Poitiers (732), he says.

The adrenaline rushes my mind. What about it?

So far we ^{have} discussed Homer's Iliad.

Like every French schoolgirl I know about The Song of Roland which tells the saga of Charlemagne's Spanish wars. I have learned about Roland, Oliver, and the ambush in the

Pyrenees mountains at Roncesvalles (in French, "Roncevaux"), the epic tale written circa 1100 and sung by the troubadours at the courts during the early middle ages. Fine! It is a consequence of the battle of Poitiers in 732, when Charles Martel routed the Moors in the Loire valley and drove them back across the Pyrenees to Spain. ^{but} What about it? Which relevant point does Henri Baud wish to make today?

He looks at me intently, I'm paralyzed. I don't know what to say.

Charles Martel saved our western Greek-Roman civilization from the Moors, he says softly, Charles Martel galvanized the western world into self-defense.

An awkward moment, but no problem.

Under my eyelids I connect the battle of Poitiers in 732, when Frankish spears routed the Moslems, to the battle at El Alamein in the desert of Cyrenaica North Africa in November 1942, when the Allies stopped Rommel's Panzers on their push eastward across the Suez Canal. I see the British, the Jewish brigade from Palestine, the Free French under General Koenig, the South Africans saving our western civilization once more from the onslaught of the barbarian hordes.

I am eighteen years old. I live in a murderous world. I am trying to pierce through the chaos. I'm trying to pursue my education interrupted by Hitler. At the Roseraie, H. B. teaches me classical literature in a present-day context. Like a gifted photographer he uses blue, red, white, yellow,

green lenses to capture the different light prisms and illuminate the distant images of history from the inside -- creating a fresh luminous effect. The images stun me. I draw my own conclusions.

I get educated.

Without ever mentioning Hitler or any of the WW II leaders, or the G.Is, the Tommies, Leclerc's Free French, the allied soldiers and their commanders doing battle in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, H.B. speaks instead of the "Western energies mobilized against the Saracens in 8th century Europe." And you see, Marguerite, history repeats itself.

We are at a time when Cardinal Lienart declares: "To leave for the STO (the compulsory work service in Germany) is not a conscientious duty." When Field Marshal Friedrich von Paulus surrenders one million men to the Russians. When Tunis and Bizerte fall to the Allies. When the weekly meat ration in France is four ounces. When deportations east threaten Jews, Communists, Masons, foreigners, resisters -- racials and politicals opposed to Hitler and Vichy. When six hundred thousand French workers are sent as slave labor to Germany (or volunteered). And another one hundred thousand are baited into building the Todt Atlantic fortifications. When young men escape to the maquis (the bush) rather than help the German war machine. While others -- equally young -- join the militia and commit horrible atrocities. When informers sell

out their compatriots for a set price or to satisfy their passions. And railroad workers derail German troop transports. When defiant men cut telephone wires and gun down traitors. And the Resistance is constantly being decimated by infiltrators but revived by high school kids and students at the universities. When names of executed hostages are broadcast over radio Vichy or printed in newspapers almost daily. When routinely I look over my shoulder to see who is following me. When evil lurks and I prick my soft fold between thumb and index finger to harden myself and not talk under torture should I get caught.

Nothing has changed, yet everything has changed.

I am still in hiding, still living under a false name, but the battles of Tours, El Alamein are now integral parts of my truth center. So is Sicily, southern Italy. Beyond the threat to myself, to my family, I see the whole of Western Civilization being fought for, one more time, by General Eisenhower, Monsieur Roosevelt (as we call the President of the United States), Churchill, De Gaulle, and their brave troops.

So that when Churchill thunders defiance at Hitler on the BBC, inspiring the defense of England, invoking the glory of the British Empire, praising the navy, the RAF, the 8th army -- his words evoke in me drawn swords, colorful banners and, victory against the invaders. When De Gaulle extolls the courage of our valiant young men fighting in North Africa,

urging the occupied French to do likewise, I hear the sound of Oliver's horn Olifant. I see beautiful finely tempered Durendal. I see beyond my own condition.

Excited days, excited nights go by this way enlivening a drab routine. In my room at night at Bonne Maman under a 40 watt electric bulb I devour literature, history, philosophy. I immerse myself in Voltaire's Pamphlets, the Letters of Madame de Stael, and Diderot's speeches. I use the brilliance of their defiant minds to strengthen my own.

On the day I return Pilote de Guerre by Saint-Exupery, during my lunch hour, Henri Baud tells me: I am busy writing an essay.

I have hidden the volume under my ski jacket to bring it back to him. It is forbidden reading. I shift my weight from foot to foot, a starved youngster who craves for knowledge rather than ground innards with rutabagas even though her stomach growls.

Henri Baud is a bit annoyed. Reluctantly he picks up "Pilote de Guerre", Flight to Arras in the English title. I can see the point of Varens in the distance clearing from under a thick cloak of fog. He fingers pages, then again he looks at his own black-inked hand written notes lying on his desk.

After a moment he says in his almost usual sonorous voice: I have been thinking, Are we "men" because Man exists Or the other way around?

Imagine you are a Jew in hiding, you wonder if your teacher is referring to dogma and the notion of baptism or to Sartre's premise of Man engaged and being responsible for his own actions. You are not yet that familiar with Sartre's Existentialism. It's a new hypothesis which is popular now that the world is shaken by deep suffering, and thinkers need to redefine God. Henri Baud is Catholic.

Although you believe man is a creature engaged in the world, you feel nervous about expounding a philosophy based solely on the notion of individual responsibility excluding the traditional Christian tenet of salvation through spiritual redemption. What if H. B. talks about original sin, and other Catholic dogmas -- I could be cornered. I know very little about his passions.

Abruptly H. B. moves forward to the edge of his chair, Tense like a tiger ready to pounce.

Have you seen any activity on Lachat when you went up to Mont Blanc?

No. No activity.

He settles back into his seat. His pupils veil over, he draws two blinds and, mask-like, he makes haste for St.Ex. Did you read that long excerpt about the "significance of our civilization?" he says.

Er... yes, it's very lyrical, I answer, thinking:
"Better safe than sorry." Moments pass. I must say that those whose freedom has never been threatened will never know the

care, the cunning, we used to protect ours.

H. B. paperback in hand turns pages.

Half to himself, half to me, he mumbles: How does St.Ex. word this... his social testament? He finds the place he is looking for. There it is!

And in his deep resonant voice he reads the paragraph aloud. "... my civilization is founded upon the reverence for Man present in all men, in each individual... And this is the true meaning of my civilization. It has little by little been forgotten. It is Man who must be restored to his place among men. It is Man who is the essence of our culture..."

Dangerous words in 1943.

A few weeks ago Vichy under German pressure forbade a reprint of "Pilote de Guerre." The notion of human self-respect drew the ire of the occupying forces. They rather allocate scarce paper to Lucien Rebatet, Louis-Ferdinand Celine, Brasillach of Je Suis Partout (a far right Parisian newspaper) all muckraking anti-Semites who sell their pens to the Nazis. While Saint-Exupery, Camus, Aragon, Anouilh, Elouard -- the authors who offer us spiritual strength and talk to us about our legacy -- are denied print. Yet, seen through a certain looking glass, France enjoys special privileges: French literature is sorted out by German censors before being permitted entry into Belgium, Holland and elsewhere in the "New Europe." In 1940, publishers in Paris signed an agreement with the authorities of occupation to

self-police themselves. We were told: "The compromise enables <sic!> French thought to continue its mission." I know that Madame Pierre, the librarian in Saint-Gervais, keeps Romain Rolland, Katherine Mansfield, Thomas Hardy, and F. Scott Fitzgerald on the shelves. You could read and think in private, but you couldn't let go and exclaim: Humanism, that's my philosophy, I'm for a culture based on human dignity!

I understand St. Ex's ideas... is how I answer.

An alienated teenager, I live on the periphery of academia, on the periphery of society. I can't be chummy with anyone. I belong nowhere, yet yearn to be accepted. I try to ingratiate myself with my teacher whose interest for things military hasn't escaped me.

On the next visit, seated on my chair opposite his desk, I blurt out.

Two German army trucks drove by Chez Nous yesterday!

How many soldiers inside?

The flaps were drawn. I couldn't see!

A stare. An evaluation. A quick veil drawn over intense dark brown eyes. A hard swallow. Decidedly I'm not suited for intelligence gathering. And back to... LaFontaine.

Did you notice how the writer avoided his fate -- ?

After the fourth visit I stop going to the Roseraie for private lessons. My curriculum requires studies in philosophy. I find a teacher in Megeve. He's a young Jewish

PHD from Paris who lives with false papers on the other side of Mont d'Arbois. He and I act as if we didn't know who the other is.

In every day life with false documents one of the problems is socializing. Soon young people gather around Henri Baud. Besides students from Paris sent to Saint-Gervais to heal TB, there are four locals my age, and myself. We come from all different backgrounds. We call ourselves "Henri Baud's petit groupe." We are -- Yves, Ginette, Francois, Armand, Francoise, Pierre, Jean-Claude, Annette, Martha, Marguerite. We do away with surnames as is the custom of the day.

A yellowed photograph shows the girls' hair coiffed high above their foreheads, the boys' trimmed short and combed back. We roll our socks over climbing shoes. Ginette at 17 is the youngest. Twenty-two-year-old Yves is the oldest. Henri Baud is a dozen years older. Born in 1912 at nearby Cluses, Henri Baud is thirty-two. His features are finer and sharper, his pose alert. In the picture I am speaking of, the little group is standing. Henri Baud, our mentor, is seated on the edge of a table, a bit removed, aloof. His nose is thin, pinched, with a high prominent bridge. He stares into the distance as if focused on matters beyond our little group -- he is an engaged leader with a vision. A star-bound Little Prince. Martha holds our Constitution rolled up in her hand.

I'm a member of this disparate band. We organize all sorts of outings. One evening we chip in for dinner at Martha's restaurant, the "Crystal de Roche" at les Pratz. My dinner partner, Francois, tells me: Marguerite, why are you so quiet? I have been waiting for him to start talking to me. In boy-girl matters I am a bumbling teen who must draw a chalk circle around her. No intimacy, please! Had anyone guessed that I am Jewish, mine, and my family's lives would have been in jeopardy.

One special evening Ginette's parents invite the little group for a drink at the Splendid downtown opposite the esplanade. Madame Splendid confides in me at the bar that Ginette is not serious: "All she wants to do is flirt, she tells me, that's what I do. She sees me at night here at the bar mingling with guests, she doesn't realize how hard I work each day to run this one hundred-room-hotel."

I'm barely a year older than Ginette, I'm a good listener. I'm flattered that Mother Splendid takes me into her confidences. A few moments later, Henri Baud pulls me aside. He says: Ginette is using me, her mother just thanked me for letting her daughter sleep at the Roseraie because our meeting ran past curfew last Wednesday... our meeting was over at 20.30 o'clock! He implies that Ginette slept with her boyfriend.

Ginette's mother reveals herself to me; Henri Baud confides in me -- this trust bestowed on me by two grown ups

whom I admire creates a real dichotomy in me: one part of the adolescent quivers at being accepted by adult society; the other is persecuted and told, you and your people are pariahs. In Le Juif Suss, a German movie reviewed in a Parisian paper which a visiting parent from Paris had left behind at Bonne Maman, the Nazis say: "Jews drink the blood of Christian children." They depict us as monsters! They malign us! Their propaganda is filled with lies! Marguerite, my head says, Ginette's mother could have picked anybody to confide in, so could Henri Baud, but they chose you. Anti-Semites are wrong!

I confess to feeling wicked merely sitting on a high bar stool.

Whenever Armand, Pierre, Francois, Annette, Martha and I meet on the cobbles, we shake hands. We exchange a few words. We smile. We part feeling better for the encounter. None suspects that one of them is a camouflaged Jew whose mother lights Shabbat candles in the pantry. I accept their scarred lungs. I ask Armand: How did you find out you had TB? Blood in the spittle, a cold that wouldn't heal! I can't talk about what's like being Jewish.

About our families -- we all feel equally concerned. And we share equally the pains of defeat. The shame. The fears. The guilt. Why do we let others do the fighting for us?

On the night I ski down the Voza Pass, I lose my way in the forest. Hair disheveled, pants torn, face scratched, I

knock on the door of the Mont Paccard rest home. It's 9.30 p.m., well past curfew, on a pitch black moonless night, both Armand and Pierre escort Marguerite back to Bonne Maman in shin-deep snow by flashlight with chivalrous selflessness and much laughter.

The Alps Shelter us all.

One asked no questions.

Henri Baud, our teacher-mentor is well-regarded in the community. People say that he's serious, well-educated. He's a notch above them. He has a degree in Literature and in Greek-Latin. On Sunday, after church lets out, the locals approach him under the portal. Courteously they enquire, Henri, how are you? Ca va! he answers, never stopping. I think he's a natural leader.

His focus and abilities tell for him.

But there's a mystery about him.

On the day we climb through the dense Prarion forest to the high mountain village of Motivon -- "Riri" as the boys call Henri Baud, disappears.

Fifteen minutes later he comes out of an old farm house, at the far end of the trail, a way off the path. He looks enlivened with the subtle grin of a man who has accomplished his goal...

On the summer morning when our little group hikes up to the sanatorium on Assy above the Chamonix valley -- we may have walked for two-three hours over the Arve river bridge,

the railroad tracks, in meadows, all spread out -- the Parisians with rolled up pants cuffs, the locals in rough alpine garb, amidst the red poppies, the blue corn flowers, the purple gentians, we recite poetry and sing melodies of bygone times, old folk songs of love, chivalry, battles won, lost, and hardships overcome, our joie de vivre carries us on, we crawl through hedges, around clumps to see the great views one has from the Fiz range over Saint-Gervais and Mont Blanc -- Henri Baud again leaves the little group. In Assy at the sanatorium this time.

For half an hour we mull about the asphalt.

No-one says a word.

He returns. A veil drawn over sparkling eyes, his Adam's apple moving, he has the manner of a man who is pleased with himself, but hides it...

Two weeks later, one afternoon at the Roseraie in the kitchen, while I am talking to Dede, he enters. Thin, the grey hand-knitted wool scarf around his neck, he leans against the ice box.

Do you type? he asks point blank.

I nod.

He leaves, lips tight, without giving anything away...

A question, an answer. The veil drawn over secretive eyes.

The young and I wandered into his circle. His charisma

attracts us. We enjoy being taught and enlightened. He makes our lives lots more interesting. And here we are in his dining room at the Roseraie rehearsing Mountain Crest, a play by Jacques Donnault.

Performances are to be given at the local community center in Le Fayet-Saint-Gervais south for two weekends.

The script is about eight young people stranded by an avalanche at a mountain refuge. Isolated, passions erupt, relationships break up. Fresh bonds gel. After four days, outer and inner storms subside. And the eight return to the valley below with fresh insights, new partners.

At the time I'm working at Bonne Maman.

Madame Vachette fed up with my frequent absences burns my text on the afternoon she has to supervise the cure. By error, she says. I'm Marguerite (Levy), a young teacher-counselor, an underground Jew, so, I spend a whole night typing a fresh script off another actor's. Barely complaining. Zut!

In the play I'm a beguiling ingenue, a jeune premiere. I land the leading role. But two days before the opening, I'm being asked to switch roles with Annette. Why? I giggled in the love scene with Pierre yesterday. (I never before had been kissed by a boy)!

The loss hurts. I lick my wounds. I still have a good part, although not the leading one. Come and see me perform, I tell Papa and Maman.

My parents are clearing dishes off the dining table Chez Nous. Papa coughs. Maman pinches her lips. They let me understand that acting in a play is the wrong thing to do when Jews are being deported and you live under a false name. I try to lead as normal a life as possible in order to keep my sanity.

Papa and Maman disapprove of me.

Everyday life is not a winner.

Without my parents in the audience, I bring the house down anyhow with a deep deep look into my "lesser" partner's eyes, on stage.

I'm smarting from my wounds. Marguerite, distance yourself a bit from Henri Baud, he can be a cold leader. He takes the best role away from you, he cares little about other people's feelings, and, a lot about the goal, I tell myself. Another side of his character surfaces. Who is Henri Baud?

Then one day in late October, in this little world folded deep inside the alpine ranges -- a narrow glacial valley of little strategic value which harbors no Gestapo, no endemic militia, no visible hatred, and where an eighteen year-old Jewish girl with no identity can act in a play and discuss the classics with, to all appearances, a seriously ill professor of Greek-Latin and French literature -- a trio rings the doorbell at the Viallets' farm, and I haven't the

slightest clue -- why?

But Henri Baud isn't surprised.

Have you heard about the black notebook? he asks me that afternoon on his motorcycle near the Viallet farm at les Pratz off the D 902 where he and I had swung to out of curiosity.

Another year has to go by before I discover that H. B. is the head of the local resistance, and that Henri Baud in the Resistance isn't any less enigmatic than a Jew who lives underground with false papers.

Later I find out about the black notebook.

